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The European Commission's Strategic Shifts in Communication in Times of Contestation.
The Case of the #EUandME Campaign

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Summary

This paper's objective was to map the evolution of the communication strategy of the European Commission directed to European citizens in times of contestation. The assumption was that the communication strategy of the Commission, focused on legitimizing the EU, has been undergoing a slow evolution, the most recent being a shift towards an audience-centric approach, with a focus on winning "hearts and minds" and an increased use of online tools. I suggested the strategy, however, still drags old habits of top-down, informative style of the old bureaucracy.

To respond the research question "**How has the European Commission's communication strategy evolved in the face of contestation?"** a qualitative analysis of strategic documents from 2004 until 2019 was conducted. A case study of one of the three current corporate campaigns of the Commission, directed to Europeans between 17 and 35 years old, #EUandME, was used to show how the strategic guidelines are implemented. Postempiricism provided the theoretical framework to analyse the frames used to construct target groups, messages and to choose the channels to communicate with EU citizens.

This paper concludes by confirming the longstanding objective of the EC of legitimizing the EU to its citizens. It also found a gradual shift towards dialogue and an increasing audience-centric approach to communication. However, the analysis shows how the dialogue and listening tactics have mostly been used as marketing tools for gaining insight, to subsequently frame communication with the ultimate goal of convincing citizens of the Union's value in their lives. Dialogue has been also encouraged for validating pre-defined political priorities, messages and communication actions.

In an interesting evolution, increasing attention is being put in the use of values, emotions, metaphors and narratives in framing the EU storyline. The Commission is announcing further research to fine-tune their use in communication and policymaking, another element that confirms the evolution towards an audience-centric approach.

Introduction

Contestation against the European project has been a constant since the end of the "permissive consensus" period –nearly 30 years ago— embodied first by the French and Danish rejections of the Maastricht Treaty, a turning point that marked the beginning of subsequent trial and error experiments to reach out and (re)connect European citizens to the EU project. The political dimension put forward by the Maastricht Treaty brought to the surface "issues of EU citizenship, democratic legitimacy and social dialogue," issues which have been placed at the core of the EU's information and communication strategy thereafter (Michailidou 2010, 66). Moments of crises and strong questioning of the EU's legitimacy have also marked the last three tenures of the European Commission. During José Manuel Durão Barroso's first presidency (2004-2009), it was the rejection of a European Constitution and the recent underwhelming results of the EP elections; during his second mandate (2009-2014), the Eurozone crisis shook the foundations of the Union. His successor, Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019) has had to deal with Brexit, the refugee crisis and the rise of populism in member states[1]. All of these events have entailed strategic shifts in communication with the intent to reach out to citizens and bridge the gap separating them from the project. In this paper, I will try to respond to the question:

How has the European Commission's communication strategy evolved in the face of contestation?

Contestation is understood here as the result of a tension between "increasing scope, depth and influence of European integration, on the one side, and the resilience of national publics, identities and understandings, on the other" (Statham and Trenz 2013, 967). Examples of contestation can be the aforementioned initial rejection of the Maastricht Treaty, the Rejection of the European Constitution, low turnout in European elections and, more recently, Brexit and the rise to power of populist governments that promote less integration.

My hypothesis is that the European Commission has been undergoing a slow evolution of its communication strategy towards citizens, which is still focused on legitimizing the EU, but has most recently shifted towards an audience-centric approach, with a focus on winning "hearts and minds" and an increased use of online tools. In spite of this advancement, the strategy still drags old habits of top-down, informative style of the old bureaucracy.

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[1] See Annex I. Context of Contestation against the EU during the last three European Commission Presidencies: Barroso I (2004-2009), Barroso II (2009-2014) & Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019)

Postempiricists propose a view of discourse analysis that suits the purpose of this paper, which is seeking to understand the evolution of the frames that the European Commission has used to construct its communication strategies towards citizens (themselves grouped in constructed targets), notably with the objective of closing the legitimacy gap. This paper will also look at the means and tools used by the Commission to communicate with those citizens through inductive reasoning. It will do so, firstly with a qualitative analysis of selected strategic communication documents from the last three European Commission administrations, with the aim of mapping the evolutive process of its communication in the face of contestation. Secondly, a case study of one of the three corporate campaigns launched by the Juncker Commission, #EUandME, will be conducted. I've chosen this particular campaign because it embodies many changes in the Commission's communication procedures: it fosters co-creation by externalising the creative control of the main communication materials; it relies mostly on social media and it targets a population that has been brought up in de midst of contestation and crises with a campaign that wants to 'sell' a "EU that empowers with a range of life-changing and life-enriching opportunities". (DG Communication European Commission, n.d., 3).

This paper will contribute to the extensive literature on the European Commission's ongoing efforts to move the needle towards positive feelings about the EU and its core values by analysing the evolution of the Commission's communication strategies towards an audience-centric data approach, an area researched mostly by marketing and more recently by news media.

State-of-the-art review

The Legitimacy Challenge

The years leading to the 2010 Eurozone crisis and to the 2016 Referendum on Brexit were a simmering crock-pot of populist party-politics, citizen disenchantment and the emergence of online disinformation ("fake news"), a recipe that has shaken the European project. The rejection of EU-empowering institutional reforms in the French and Dutch referenda in 2005, followed by low turnout in the 2009 European Parliament elections, the rise of Eurosceptic parties and the Brexit saga are all symptoms of the same illness of citizens' disconnect with the EU. The European Institutions, in particular the European Commission, have been trying to

legitimize the European project since its inception. One of the main criticisms of the EU "is that it suffers from a democratic deficit, which leads to the problem of legitimacy" (Ward 2001, 77). Unmeasurable amounts of ink have been poured to discuss whether the EU is legitimate or not, to describe the symptoms that define the so-called democratic deficit and the reasons for it. "Some scholars refer to a lack of 'input' legitimation "due to citizens' lack of influence and control. Others may lament the lack of 'output' legitimation due to mismatches between citizens' preferences and politicians' delivery; or the lack of political party articulation and contestation of central EU-level policies and matters of institutional design." (Føllesdal 2006, 444). The EU has also found champions among scholars, who defend its legitimacy by stating the EU is constrained by "constitutional checks and balances", namely "narrow mandates, fiscal limits, super-majoritarian and concurrent voting requirements and separation of powers." (Moravcsik 2002, 603). The multi-level governance of the European Union makes its legitimacy difficult to grasp to EU citizens, because the dynamics differ from what they are used to at the national level. "…policy making at the EU level can be characterized as *policy without politics*, which in turn makes for national *politics without policy*, as increasing numbers of policies are transferred from the national political arena to the EU, leaving national citizens with little direct input on the EU-related policies that affect them, and only national politicians to hold to account for them." (Schmidt 2013, 12).

Different factors can play a role in undermining the European institutions' legitimacy, including political elites developing activities in both the national and the supranational levels. "Party systems may play a significant role in either the exaggeration or the minimization of the European issue in different domestic settings" and that what they call 'the European issue' can be "useful for parties taking strategic positions." (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008, 7). As increasingly active supranational actors put pressure on member states that do not act according to EU democratic values, those member states' elites view EU institutions as a threat to national sovereignty (Leconte 2014). Other authors suggest that the main contestation to EU integration lies beyond party politics and that the politicization of European integration with its respective impact on legitimacy "is staged in and for the mass media." (Wilde, Michailidou, and Trenz 2013, 2). Euroscepticism, for other scholars, needs to be understood as a mainstream, multi-level phenomenon that takes into account chronology, geography and that has both internal impact on the EU and on its external action. (Leconte 2010). This "legitimacy" problem has been a key driver for policymaking, specifically in the case of communication towards EU citizens, as we will see going forward.

The European Commission: In Search for Dialogue in the Midst of Contestation

The European Commission is responsible for "explaining EU policies to outside audiences." (DG Communication European Commission 2018). It does so through its Directorate-General for Communication since its creation in 2004, but it has provided information and communication strategies and played the role of informing citizens about the Union long before. (Pex 1998). Although inter-institutional participation in the efforts to communicate the European project is increasingly put forward, understanding the role of the Commission as a body that proposes and implements policy and legislation is key when trying to study how the EU has tried to communicate and engage with its citizens, most notably in times of contestation. Throughout the history of European integration, closing the legitimacy void and therefore winning the loyalty of the citizens of the Community (later the Union) has been a constant objective of the European Commission. The means, methods and tools to achieve it have evolved in time. In the quest for legitimacy "attention has (therefore) shifted towards the crucial link between the EU and its citizens: a European Public Sphere (EPS). This has led to the discovery of a new black hole in the EU universe closely linked to the legitimacy deficit and the democratic deficit of the EU: the communication deficit" (Brüggemann 2005, 58).

A turning point in the Commission's way of handling this communication "black hole" in a strategic way was the appointment of Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström, in 2004, as Commissioner in charge of Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy. For the first time, Communication became a Directorate General on its own. Another key event is the publication, in 2006, of the White Paper on a European Communication Policy, which makes a clear link between the European Public Sphere, the EU's communication policy and citizen (dis)engagement.

> *"...many of the policy decisions that affect daily life for people in the EU are taken at European level. People feel remote from these decisions, the decision-making process and EU institutions. There is a sense of alienation from 'Brussels', which partly mirrors the disenchantment with politics in general. One reason for this is the inadequate development of a 'European public sphere' where the European debate can unfold. Despite exercising the right to elect members of the European Parliament, citizens often feel that they themselves have little opportunity to make their voices heard on European issues, and there is no obvious forum within which they can discuss these issues together. A pan-European political culture – with pan-European political groups and foundations – is still developing."(European Commission 2006a, 4)*

Criticism towards the Commission's communicational style has focused on its political handicaps, its unilaterality, but also on its lack of professionalism, the two latter, problems addressed in the most recent DG Communication's strategic documents. (DG Communication 2016b). In analysing the challenges of the European Commission to communicate with citizens, scholars point to different structural problems.

> *"...the Commission's public communication suffers from the fragmentation of political authority, a pervading technocratic mindset and a lack of adequate staffing. More importantly, however, the Commission is located within a system of governance, which depoliticizes conflict and obfuscates political accountability. This system has been used by Member States to circumvent public scrutiny and externalize public dissatisfaction to the Commission." (Meyer 1999, 617)*

The road has been rocky for the European Commission to, first, understand the importance of having a strategy to communicate with citizens, and second, to take the necessary steps to shift from a vertical, unidirectional strategy, to one that fosters dialogue and citizen engagement. "While the Commission pursued arcane policies for a long time, its approach to information has changed during the last decade. A change of paradigm might be under way but the legacy of European policy without '*Öffentlichkeit*'[2] constraints all attempts at pursuing more democratic information policies aimed at strengthening the public sphere." (Brüggemann 2005, 57). This evolution in the dialogic direction is ongoing. In the face of contestation, the European Commission has developed different strategies that have put communication at the centre of the action. "Before the Maastricht crisis, the attitude of the Commission's top echelons towards public communication varied between half-hearted reform attempts, political neglect and outright hostility" (Meyer 1999, 624). Scholars have shown there was also a shift from the communication approach of the Commission before and after the rejection of the European Constitution, another landmark of contestation. "In the pre-Constitution period, the commission's proposals to address these issues (contestation, lack of legitimacy) focused on one-way communication, in other words on improving the access to, and quality of, information regarding the institutional structure, competencies and achievements of the union. 'Post-Constitution' there is a shift towards two-way communication, with the commission launching its 'going local' strategy and emphasising the importance of public consultations, the opening-up of the decision-making process and dialogue with EU citizens."(Michailidou 2010, 70). A paper focusing on the development of the "dialogic and participatory" dimensions of the Commission's communication strategy from 2001 to 2013 (Van Brussel 2014) highlights the

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[2] Public

strategic shifts backwards during second Barroso tenure. The Commission went from inaugurating a separate Directorate General for Communication in 2004, and appointing Commission Vice-president Margot Wallström with a special mandate to develop a communication strategy, to a second mandate (submerged in the Eurozone crisis and its implicit wave of contestation) where, not only no Commissioner was in charge of the communication strategy alone, but the approach to dialogue with the citizens made a U turn. "Whereas up to 2009 the Commission had been gradually developing a general interest in 'becoming all ears', citizens in the EPS nowadays have 'to catch the Commission's eye' to make their voices heard. Professional and specialised stakeholders, by contrast, are still target audiences and interlocutors invited to contribute actively." (Van Brussel 2014, 103). In other findings pertinent to this paper, the author confirms that the Commission's approach to dialogue with citizens was permeated by the objective of filling the legitimacy gap and points out to a step back towards vertical, unidirectional communication during the period of the Barroso II Commission. (Van Brussel 2014, 93)

The EC and its DG COMM may well have gradually introduced tools for interaction with citizens in their communicational tactics but, are they still fixed on what Schlesinger has called "a top-down supply-side transmission of political information to recalcitrant citizens, using traditional media instrumentally and new media expediently on the assumption that this will 'close the gap' and end the 'alienation' detected"? (Fossum, Schlesinger, and Foret 2007, 68)

Social Media: Connecting the Dots

To the series of political blows cited above, that have been change drivers for the European Commission's policymaking regarding communication (European Commission 2006a), one must add another major change-inducing phenomenon: the rise in access to the internet in European households and in the overall internet use. A dramatic shift in the way European citizens consume information has also been in the making in the past decade. From 55% of households with internet access in 2007, the EU28 had gone to 89% in 2018. (Eurostat 2019). Internet use has increasingly gained traction in detriment of the radio and the written press in Europe. In the last 8 years, people who declare a daily use of the Internet have risen from 45% to 66% according to Eurobarometer data. "Between 2010 and 2018, Internet has moved from the fourth position to the second, now ahead of radio and the written press; social media are now on the fourth place, ahead of the written press." (Commission européenne 2018, 6).

The European institutions have long been addressing the issue of incorporating a diversified use of media in its communication efforts. In a 1998 report issued by the European Parliament, analysing the information and communication policy in the European Union Committee on Culture, Youth, Education and the Media, the use of new technologies was already put forward. "…the definition of a better European communication policy must take into account the new instruments offered by the information society, the possibility of interactive use of these instruments and the development of an electronic democracy"(Pex 1998, 7). Traditional news outlets and journalists, still a major part of the media mix used by the European Commission to fulfil its communication goals, bring with them challenges to the agenda-setting objective of the EU. Focused on national interests, efforts to convey convergence or unified messages through the traditional media becomes challenging. "…it is generally believed that national editorial cultures still determine a differentiated practice of news production with regard to the EU." (Trenz 2008, 299). Taking the "unmanageability" of the press into account, the possibilities that the internet brings of producing, disseminating and controlling the messages through "owned media" become an attractive option for institutions wishing to transmit carefully framed messages directly to the intended audiences. (Rooke 2011, 1).

Scholars studying the European Public Sphere have seen in the internet and the community creation it facilitates as a possible venue for the existence of a shared "space", even if only virtual, in the fragmented reality of the EU. Internet use has also been identified as a potential key to access European citizens and foster dialogue and deliberation on EU issues. "… in the absence of a pan-European mass media, it is precisely the internet's core ability to transcend ethno-cultural, linguistic and geographical boundaries that renders it instrumental to deliberative democracy and broader citizens' participation in decision-making at a European level."(Michailidou 2010, 67). It is also online, however, that much of the most recent contestation of the EU occurs, focussing often on the very topic at the heart of the Commission communication policies: legitimacy. In times of contestation, such as the Eurozone crisis, and in the context of elections such as the 2009 parliamentary ballot "online media, particularly social media, appear instrumental in the amplification of EU contestation and popular discontent" (Michailidou 2015, 325).

As citizens move from traditional media to the internet to consume and share information, modern political campaigning cannot occur without taking into account digital technologies for reasons that go beyond internet's potential to foster the dialogic dimension of their

communication. In the marketing-driven context of today's political campaigning, citizens become marketers themselves. "Contemporary political campaigners are not content to sit back and hope that their candidate goes viral through grassroots fan hashtags and memes, but instead actively work to shape the flow of electronic word of mouth by providing tools and templates to transform supporters into disciplined brand evangelists." (Penney, Joel 2017, 101).

The Message, the Messenger or the Audience? The Audience-Centric Approach to Communication

It is well established by postempiricist scholars that elements like language, discourse, argument, and stories are key in framing policy questions (Fischer 2003, 14) and the European institutions, notably the Commission, as this paper will analyse, have for decades framed their messages to better reach citizens in an attempt to bridge the legitimacy gap. Much has been written in political science on how institutions and the actors involved in them act to shape messages in order to insert meaning into their social constructs. "Politicians and policy decision-makers, like the public generally, are engaged in the manipulation of signs and symbols that shape the way these objects are seen and understood, much like the author of a play. Viewed this way, the various actors, following the scripts of ideologically shaped discourses, emphasize different objectives, actors and outcomes in competing prescriptions. Political action, like action generally, is shaped and controlled by the discourses that supply it with meaning." (Fischer 2003, 23).

Under this logic, EU values, messages about the European Union and its advantages are constructed frames that, as we will later see, institutions such as the Commission use to communicate with their audiences. The benefits of this kind of framing came to the attention of scholars during the enlargement process. The "what's in it for me" factor as an argument to "sell" the benefits of the European project in a marketing-style manner has proved effective, according to some authors. "The exposure to news framing of EU enlargement as an opportunity resulted in higher levels of support for EU integration as well as in higher benefit expectations from EU membership for one's country and for oneself personally" (Vliegenthart et al. 2008, 418). However, other scholars have pointed out that the negativity or positivity of messages can have different effects, depending on individual views on the subject. "Pre-existing attitudes establish a reference point from which campaign messages are seen as either positive or negative. Thus, not all negative information is seen as negative and not all positive

information is seen as positive from an individual point of view" (Schuck and Vreese 2012, 60).

In an internet-driven context, other elements have an impact on the construction of frames. Interaction in online platforms provides institutions and campaigners with considerable amounts of data about the audiences they are trying to engage and influence. In addition, as data becomes a stronger currency in the political arena, the possibilities of the internet become increasingly attractive. "A further reason why political campaign organizations are so eager to launch participatory marketing efforts online is the value of the personal data they generate. Unlike any earlier communication technology, every action and interaction on the Internet produces data points that can be collected, stored, aggregated, analyzed, and packaged for a variety of strategic purposes." (Penney, Joel 2017, 102). In recent developments, we have seen how the misuse of citizen data to manipulate political behaviour through disinformation campaigns (the so-called "fake news") can have distorting effects, as it is palpable in the case of Cambridge Analytica's use of data to influence the vote on the referendum that brought Brexit or Donald Trump's election as President of the United States. (Cadwalladr 2018).

A thorough use of the data provided via online interactions, and the application of that knowledge to understand trends intrinsic to target audiences, to build frames, tailor messages, and identify communication channels are tactics mostly developed by marketing and more recently by news media. This audience-centric data approach applied to institutional and corporate communications in the EU institutions, and more specifically the Commission, is an area much less explored by scholars. Social Sciences have for long worked on defining target audiences in order to study them. "The social construction of a target population refers to (1) the recognition of the shared characteristics that distinguish a target population as socially meaningful, and (2) the attribution of specific, valence-oriented values, symbols, and images to the characteristics. Social constructions are stereotypes about particular groups of people that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, religion, and the like." (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 335).

Applied in the context of news media, using the concept of "measurable journalism", some scholars have shown that the very online capabilities that allow audiences (citizens) to engage in two-way communication with news organisations also allow those news media to capture data on their preferences and behaviour. "As journalists speak more of 'engagement' with the

audiences and encourage the sharing of news content, they simultaneously build traceable relationships that can eventually lead to individualized news or target marketing." (Carlson 2018, 411). In order to extract value, in this case from an audience, it needs to be quantified. The production of value, therefore, emanates from data. "The biggest context of all to datafication is the current transformation of capitalism under which the production of value is focused on the extraction of value from data" (Couldry 2018, 701).

One of the consequences of this audience-centric approach by news media that has been identified by scholars is a growing influence of what matters to the audience in the news production and news selection criteria. In other words, by measuring what audiences care about, journalists have new elements to define what constitutes news or newsworthy material. "Whereas earlier newsroom sociology emphasized the submersion of audience centred news judgments in favour of professional codes, the research discussed has documented that the process of 'deciding what's news' is increasingly influenced by quantitative audience measurement techniques. These findings are in line with a stream of literature, largely separate from traditional newsroom sociology that emphasizes the progressive quantification of audience understanding." (Anderson 2011, 563). As scholars use this audience-centric approach to analyse media consumption patterns, some myth-demolishing science has emerged, showing, for instance, how public attention is more spread across different media than what media-centric analysis suggests. Segmentation facilitated by new media, according to these findings, does not necessarily translate into "radical dismembering of society" (Webster and Ksiazek 2012, 51). Audiences that move across media in unexpected ways pose additional challenges to the sender, which now needs not only to tailor messages according to data extracted from online interactions, but also to understand consumption patterns that are more complex than previously expected.

The way news media has adopted an audience-centric approach can illuminate how institutions such as the Commission may use the data insights this approach brings to redefine frames, storytelling and communication channels. "Audience-centric engagement has become increasingly important, and plays into how emerging technology has been approached" by news media (Chua and Westlund 2019, 161). This includes the creation of new methods of interaction via social media, an important boost in metrics monitoring and subsequent adaptations of content according to results. Could shifting towards an audience-centric approach influence the European Commission's communication strategy, as it has been the case with news media?

How could such an approach affect the framing of messages, the storytelling and the outcomes in bridging the legitimacy gap?

Research design

Theoretical approach

Postempiricists propose a view of discourse analysis that suits the purpose of this paper, which is seeking to understand the evolution of the frames that the European Commission has used to construct its communication strategies towards citizens, notably with the objective of closing the legitimacy gap (citizens who are themselves grouped in constructed targets). This paper will also look at the means and tools used by the Commission to communicate with those citizens. "Focusing on the discursive social constructions of the political actors, policy institutions, and analysts, postempiricism—particularly its postmodern variants—focuses on the crucial role of language, discourse, rhetorical argument, and stories in framing both policy questions and the contextual contours of argumentation, particularly the ways normative presuppositions operate below the surface to structure basic policy definitions and understandings." (Fischer 2003, 14). The postempiricist discourse analysis looks at "ways in which people's interests are discursively constructed" by including "an analysis of the often distorted nature of political communication in Western societies" (Fischer 2003, 15).

In the case of the Commission's responses to citizen contestation, postempirical discourse analysis will be used to dig into the strategic communication documents of both of Barroso's mandates (2004-2009; 2009-2014) and the Juncker tenure (2014-2019). As it will be further explained in the methodological approach section, a case study has been chosen to analyse how the DG Communication of the European Commission has implemented the strategic guidelines in a particular corporate campaign. In postempirical discourse analysis, who communicates the message, to whom—and how, also plays an important role in the analysis of discourse relating to the political process (Elder and Cobb 1983, 9), another aspect that is important for the purpose of this paper. In the quest for legitimacy, as we have seen in the literature review, the Commission has been constructing a storyline about European integration, with variations in storytelling, medium and approach, but consistent in its goal of closing the legitimacy gap. Postempiricist discourse analysis also looks at the role of facts and their interpretation in policymaking: "Empirical data and information play a role in policymaking, but their meaning

is determined by how they fit into the particular arguments of an ideological framework."
(Fischer 2003, 62)

Research question

How has the European Commission's communication strategy evolved in the face of contestation?

Hypothesis

The European Commission has been undergoing a slow evolution of its communication strategy, which is still focused on legitimizing the EU, but has most recently shifted towards an audience-centric approach, with a focus on winning "hearts and minds" and an increased use of online tools. In spite of this evolution, the strategy still drags old habits of top-down, informative style of the old bureaucracy.

Methodological approach
Document analysis[3]

To understand the evolution of the Commission's communication strategy in times of contestation, I have chosen to analyse strategic communication documents from the last three administrations, all of which have been contestation ridden, but also interesting in terms of the important shifts in the communication approach towards citizens that have taken place during the three mandates. To respond to my research question, the analysis, although inductive in nature, will look at:

- How has the European Commission, and more specifically its Directorate General for Communication, dealt with contestation by citizens of the benefits of the European project, or with their mere indifference through strategic communication?

- What are the main triggers of contestation during the studied periods considered also as triggers in the Commission's strategic shifts in communication?

- What are the changes applied to the Commission's communication strategy in this period to respond to this contestation?

- What remains from previous strategies and communication styles?

- How are target audiences constructed? Who is in and who is left behind?

- How are communications channels used? Which role for online media?

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[3] The list of documents to be analysed from the Barroso I and II tenures and from Juncker's can be found on Annex II

The first Barroso commission (2004-2009)

This Commission is a landmark for communication in the EU context. As said before, a separate directorate general for communication was created, and a Vice-President was put in charge of developing a communication strategy to bring citizens closer to the EU. The documents to be analysed for this period are chosen because they either lay out the foundations of the strategy or present contrasting views from another EU body, for instance, the European Parliament.

The second Barroso Commission (2009-2014)

The second Barroso Commission had to face the financial and economic crisis that hit hard in 2010. Even as priorities shifted towards the recovery process, communication remained present and a few documents shed light on the strategic orientations of the Barroso II Commission, notably on the first steps towards an official corporate communications strategy.

The Juncker Commission (2014-2019)

Under the Juncker Commission, the Commission's Directorate-General for Communication became a Presidential service with an overarching objective: "Citizens perceive that the EU is working to improve their lives and engage with the EU. They feel their concerns are taken into consideration in European decision making process and they know about their rights in the EU'."("Communication Policy | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament" n.d.). A Commission that has put particular attention to communication has produced an important number of documents on the topic. The documents to be analysed were chosen either because they represent a continuation of a previously established strategy (e.g., the Corporate communication documents), because they lay out the foundations of the new strategy or because they present recommendations for the future of EU communication with citizens.

Case selection: #EUandME

The most recent evolution of the Commission's communication strategy will be analysed through the case study of the corporate communication campaign #EUandME. This campaign, coordinated by DG COMM (specifically by its Strategic Communication Unit) is one of the three campaigns that embody the Commission's new strategic approach to communicating Europe. The first to be deployed was #InvestEU. Targeting entrepreneurs, it "uses 100 real life stories to illustrate how EU investment is creating jobs, changing lives and revitalising communities across Europe" (European Commission 2019b, 47). The campaign's

implementation final report (from March 2017 to March 2018) shows that the chosen messages, built around EU funded projects, were effective, even though the KPI[4] "awareness of positive EU impacts", was not met. (Technopolis Group 2018, 54).

The second and still ongoing corporate campaign, #EUandME, chosen as a case study for this paper, targets young Europeans, from 17 to 35 years old. It constitutes a showcase to the Commission's efforts to de-centralize, co-create and engage with EU citizens by using mostly online and multimedia content with messages that build on emotions rather than on facts alone. I have chosen #EUandME as the case study for this paper because it represents many changes in the Commission's communication procedures: the campaign fosters co-creation by externalising the creative control of the main communication materials; it relies mostly on social media and it targets a population that has been brought up in de midst of contestation and crises with a campaign that wants to 'sell' a "EU that empowers with a range of life-changing and life-enriching opportunities". (DG Communication European Commission, n.d., 3).

The third corporate campaign #EUProtects, targeting Europeans 35 to 55 years old, focuses on "ordinary heroes" that "work together across Europe to address people's safety and security concerns, demonstrating EU action on global challenges that cannot be dealt with at national level" (European Commission 2019b, 47). Equally grounded on the use of emotionally framed, audience-tailored messages, the campaign was just starting when this research began and not enough information was available.

Document analysis and semi-structured interviews[5]

For the case study of #EUandME, I will analyse internal Commission documents, explaining the criteria for the conception of the campaign, the monitoring and evaluation framework used and the interim performance report. Other audio-visual materials include conferences of key stakeholders of the campaign. A semi-structured interview was also conducted with an external expert involved in the campaign. Another interview with an internal direct stakeholder from the DG Communication was conducted for background, and not cited on this paper. The idea is to determine, by analysing these documents, if the proposed changes on the strategy are present in the conception and implementation of this corporate campaign, and whether or not elements of previous strategies remain present.

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[4] Key Performance Indicator
[5] The full list of documents and other resources can be found on Annex III.

From top-down to audience centric: mapping the slow transformation of the EC's communication strategy

Striving for legitimacy

On this section, I will analyse how, while maintaining the same objective of bridging the legitimacy gap, the Commission has experimented with different approaches and tools, in a slow, rocky process towards more attention to citizens (audience-centric approach) and increased use of online tools and data[6].

Since its inception, the European Union (and before the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community) has strived to legitimize its Institutions by closing the gap that separates them from the citizens. The European Commission has drafted numerous strategic documents with the objective of strengthening legitimacy through information and communication in the studied period between 2004 and 2019. Thirteen documents analysed[7] show this goal has remained constant throughout the last three Commission's Presidencies. Before Barroso's 2004-2009 tenure, the Commission focused on improving "perception of the European Union and its Institutions and their legitimacy by deepening knowledge and understanding of its tasks, structure and achievements and by establishing a dialogue with its citizens". (European Commission 2004, 3). Fiercely criticised, this Commission strategy was the object of a review by the European Parliament. In a forward-looking report, the EP urged for a refocus of the communication strategy to one that would carefully select and target audiences and devote greater attention "to the content of the messages put out, so as to stimulate the interest of citizens by tackling their concerns" (Herrero-Tejedor 2005, 4). The report goes on to suggest transformations of the EU's messages, focus and approach to "touch people's feelings" and recommends increasing the use of online resources. "A change in approach is needed: it is not citizens who should go looking for information, but information which should go looking for citizens."(Herrero-Tejedor 2005, 11)

Inside out: "putting the house in order"[8]

The first Barroso Commission (2004-2009) made communication a priority and set guidelines to conduct both internal, institutional changes and communicational ones. Institutionally, it set

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[6] Annex IV. Evolution of communication focus/style 2004-2019
[7] See Annex II.
[8] As stated in (European Commission 2005a, 3)

out to "ensure more effective communication about Europe supported within the Commission by a modern and more professional approach across all departments" through a restructuring of communication and information services (European Commission 2005a, 3). In terms of communicational objectives, this Commission proposed a "forward-looking agenda for better communication to enhance the public debate in Europe." (European Commission 2006b, 3). The new strategic guidelines, which meant to put an end to the top-down, purely informative communicational style of its predecessors, came after the underwhelming EP elections of 2004 and the rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. They point out to weaknesses of previous endeavours to reach citizens, mostly attributing the legitimacy gap to "continuous fragmentation of communication activities by insufficient coordination", political messages divorced from "citizens' interests, needs and preoccupations", campaigns focused on "the political elite and media" and too little emphasis on "dialogue and proactive communication." (European Commission 2005a, 4).

Listening, communicating and going local became the summary of the new vision, which also called on other EU institutions to join in the communication efforts. This is the Commission of Wallström's White Paper and of the promise of a new conception of communication, beyond the unidirectional, opaque and unprofessional one previously described by Herrero-Tejedor in his EP report in 2005. For this Commission, communication was described as more than just informing, as "an essential part of the political process."(European Commission 2005a, 3). But the transformation of the Commission's communication moved slower than the political process did. It took the Commission eight months to come up with its "Action plan to improve communicating Europe." Vice-president Wallström published her landmark White Paper six months after that, an ambitious document "proposing a fundamentally new approach - a decisive move away from one-way communication to reinforced dialogue, from an institution-centred to a citizen-centred communication[9], from a Brussels-based to a more decentralised approach" (European Commission 2006b, 4). The White Paper however, was still calling the other EU institutions –the national, regional and local authorities in the Member States, European political parties and civil society— to contribute their ideas on how to best work together to close the gap. The thorough transformation proposed by the Commission was soon to be halted by one of the biggest crisis the Union has endured.

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[9] Underlined for emphasis

"Mirror, mirror…"[10]

When the financial and economic crisis hit during the second Barroso tenure (2009-2014), its impact on the EU's legitimacy became a major source of concern for the Commission. "Our European societies have been deeply shaken by the crisis and there is unrelenting pressure on the EU and its Member States to provide credible and coordinated solutions." (Reding & Lewandowski 2013, 2). The crisis meant "new and unprecedented challenges for the image of the European Union and the trust of European citizens in its Institutions" (Ibidem) and provoked yet another shift in communication: the birth of the Commission's Corporate Communication strategy. Old reflexes die hard, especially in times of crisis. Objectives such as "raising public awareness about the EU as a whole", "achieve a more positive public perception of the EU and its activities," "inform and engage" (Ibidem 2–3) re-entered the space that had been occupied by previous objectives such as "make the EU institutions more responsive, open and accessible" (European Commission 2006b, 8). Communication became, once again, less about listening, and more about responding to the contestation, to the undermining of the EU's legitimacy by "selling" the European projects' advantages. By reputation and image management. "There is an urgent need to communicate with greater clarity and strength the political priorities on which the Commission and other EU institutions deliver collectively, as these define the EU's image." (Reding & Lewandowski 2013, 2). Communicating with citizens became, once again, just informing to get citizens support, by assuming that the legitimacy gap could be bridged with information. "Communicating, i.e. informing the general public about EU policies is another way of strengthening citizens' awareness of European affairs and their rights. Communication activities therefore raise awareness of and provide support for the political priorities of the Union." (European Commission 2011, 7).

This shift away from what had been defined by Wallström's White Paper as "citizen-centric" communication did not mean the Commission started from a *tabula rasa*. Citizen dialogues persisted and in its recommendations for the next Commission, seeking "the views of the public through dialogues and social media activity" was pointed out as a priority, in one of the first explicit mentions of social media as a tool to reach citizens (Reding & Lewandowski 2013, 4). Structural changes in the management of external communication continued too, with, for instance, the setup of a Communication Steering Board, whose mission was to provide "guidance and [ensures] overall consistency of the Commission's political communication."

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[10] "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" is the phrase the Wicked Queen in the children's story Snow White asks the mirror. It can symbolize a self-centred vision.

(Ibidem, 2). The budget for corporate communication actions was to be funded following the principle of collegiality, and all Directorate Generals concerned by a communication action had to participate by allocating funds from their own budgets, another important evolution. (Ibidem, 3).

The "last chance" Commission

Juncker's pitch for a more "political Commission" (DG Communication 2016a, 3) is at the core of the communication strategy of his tenure (2014-2019). Under the "listen - advise – engage" mission statement, DG Communication proposed a strategy to respond to the political ambitions of the Commission. It's no coincidence that, under Juncker, DG COMM became a Presidential service. Up to that moment, only the Spokesperson service, the liaison with the accredited media, was under the direct authority of the Presidency. "DG COMM's role as a Presidential service is crucial in launching and sustaining the communication on all of the 10 Commission priorities by activating the appropriate multimedia digital approach[11]." (Ibidem, 6). All corporate communication, according to the strategy, must link to the political priorities. Even though priorities are to be research-based and citizens' needs are to be taken into account, the top-down approach remains present in this strategy. Dialogue with citizens is put at the top of the list, but the final goal is informing, convincing, and improving the image of the EU and its pre-defined priorities, a set of objectives that resonate with the pre-Barroso communication strategies.

Engagement with European citizens, however, remained a preoccupation in a period following bottom-low turnout in the European elections. But larger problems awaited. By the end of 2015, the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration, IOM, estimated that "an unprecedented one million people had fled to Europe" (UNHCR 2015). Brexit was already looming, with the United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum yet to be scheduled when, in his 2015 State of the Union address, Juncker painted a grim picture of the EU: "Our European Union is not in a good state. There is not enough Europe in this Union. And there is not enough Union in this Union. We have to change this. And we have to change this now." (Juncker 2015).

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[11] Underlined for emphasis

Reaching out to citizens (again)

Juncker commissioned a report to his Special Adviser on Outreach Towards Citizens with the objective of "designing the framework for a more citizen-focused [12]Europe" (Van den Brande 2017, 8). Legitimacy came back as the ever-missing element. "The Union's delivery, democracy and destiny — all of which are strongly interrelated — are being questioned like never before. The EU needs to redouble its efforts to earn renewed legitimacy in the eyes of the European electorate" (Ibidem, 6). A lot is proposed on this report. It presents the "urgent need" for a Habermasian "disempowered dialogue of emancipated people" (Ibidem, 7) all while aiming at persuading citizens, through that dialogue, of the EU's legitimacy and value in their lives, a clear contradiction. A full chapter is dedicated to the notion of "citizen-focused and citizen-owned Europe". It emphasises the idea that "outreach to citizens is related to the concept of 'community', which embraces the local, regional, national and international contexts that individuals live in to create a common public space" (Ibidem 2017, 10). With the "going local" approach of the Barroso I Commission as a starting point, it introduces a new element: the concept of "multilevel citizenship" by which the European dimension (its values and identity) is added to the national and regional ones, without replacing them.

By April 2019, the Juncker Commission announced it had held 1.572 citizen dialogues in 583 locations, plus an online consultation on the future of Europe (European Commission 2019a, 4). The dialogues and the online consultation are presented as a great success on this Commission's report, with 194,000 participants between 2015-2019 and a direct impact on policymaking. "The Commission presented a progress report on citizens' dialogues and citizens' consultations to the European Council in December 2018, identifying seven key domains where Europeans expect a lot from the Union. For the first time, the European Council conclusions welcomed the Dialogues and Consultations and made a direct link with the preparation of the Strategic Agenda."(Ibidem, 4). However, critics say the Commission overstates that success. "The Commission is proud that 175,000 citizens have participated in these events over the last two years. It's an impressive sounding figure, but well below 1 percent of the population of Europe. If the village council in Larreule called a public meeting with the same success rate it would have an audience of 0.14 people — nowhere close to quorum." (Inman 2019).

Another important element presented on the Van den Brande report is a clear recommendation to use emotions in order to connect with citizens. "Legitimacy can only be sustained as a virtual

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[12] Underlined for emphasis

cohesive force if it comes from <u>people's hearts, as well as their minds</u>[13]," (Van den Brande 2017, 7) a slogan now used by the Strategic Communications Unit of DG COMM when presenting their corporate campaigns.(Zournatzi 2018). A focus on emotions as well as reason is of growing interest for the Commission. A study published in July this year by its Joint Research Centre, focusses on the role of emotions, values, framing, metaphor and narrative, among other concepts, in policymaking. It announces their next steps in research of better tools for political communication with citizens. "Building on the analytical framework for values and a deeper understanding of the online environment on political decision-making, this project will investigate how to turn the insights about political communication in this report into practical tools and advice for public bodies to ethically communicate using values, narratives, metaphors and frames as well as causal reasoning."(Mair D., Smillie L., La Placa G., Schwendinger F., Raykovska M., Pasztor Z., van Bavel R 2019, 67)

New tools for new targets: dialogue and online resources

As the Commission's strategies evolved towards more focus on citizens (audiences), the means and tools to do so have also changed[14]. In the pre-Barroso I documents analysed, information professionals, particularly journalists, decision-makers and, lastly, the "general audience" were the main groups targeted by the Commission. (European Commission 2004, 16–17). At the time, people (Commission relays and networks such as info Points, European Documentation Centres and other university reference centres) and audio-visual media (Europe by Satellite or EbS; Euronews) were the main tools for outreach proposed.

As the Barroso I Commission laid out a strategy based on listening, communicating and going local, new audiences became targets. "These debates should involve 'civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties'…there would be an added value in listening to specific target groups, such <u>as young people or minority groups</u>[15], that were not reached during the referendum campaigns."(European Commission 2005b, 3). With the new audiences, new tools started to emerge. Representations became prime stakeholders in the communication strategy. "They will have a key role implementing this action plan, in addressing target audiences in their own languages… listening to people and providing the Commission with in-depth, accurate and timely information." (European Commission 2005a, 9–10). The

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[13] Underlined for emphasis for this paper.
[14] Annex V. Evolution of the means and tools proposed by the Commission in its communication strategies, according to the approach (top-down vs. audience-centric)
[15] Underlined for emphasis

organization of National debates and of Commissioners' visits to Member States, a European Round Table for Democracy, targeted focus groups (with special attention to young people & minorities) and programmes such as Citizens for Europe are some of the new proposals during this period. (European Commission 2005b, 5–10).

The crisis ridden Barroso II Commission refocused the strategy into a more informative and top-down approach, all while maintaining some of the tactics from the previous endeavours. It proposed, in its corporate communication framework, tools such as "integrated communication campaigns on television, web, print, social, outdoor and indoor media," content production, acquisition of media space, online promotion techniques, "activities aimed at citizens" as well as studies and evaluations. (Reding & Lewandowski 2013, 4–5)

The real emphasis on online tools came during the Juncker Commission. "Social media activities should become one of the main communication channels for Representations, complementing their political, media and outreach activities."(DG Communication 2016a, 6). Some of the highlights of this tenure's communication strategy are corporate campaigns, "upgrading the digital presence of Representations", a focus on multimedia services, the "Digital Transformation Programme" and the enhancement of EUROPA site. (DG Communication 2016a).

Citizen Dialogues, road shows and tours of the Vice-Presidents, the Europe Direct centres and the Eurobarometer have remained in the Juncker Commission's toolbox to reach citizens. The 2016-2020 strategy, which points towards audience-centric tactics and tools, has, however, two (out of three) top-down objectives for DG COMM's communication service: "Commission receives targeted media coverage through relevant publications and continuous engagement with media" and "citizens are better informed about the EU, in particular about the Commission's political priorities and their rights." The only audience-centric specific objective "citizens express themselves towards and engage with EU Commissioners through Citizens' Dialogues *and other forms of direct communication (like Social Media)"* is meant to "stimulate citizens' interest in EU affairs and contribute to restoring trust in EU institutions" (DG Communication 2016b, 18–19).

The #EUandME campaign: applying the strategy

In July 2018, the Juncker Commission presented its proposal for Corporate Communication, focussing the strategy on three main strands "designed to be mutually reinforcing and capture

all the Commission's political priorities" (European Commission 2018b, 1). As explained in the Research Design section of this paper, the campaign #EUandME has been chosen as a case study to look at the concrete translation into tools of the communication strategic guidelines of the Juncker Commission as well as at the frames used to bring this campaign to fruition. "It is about bringing the whole of the EU into one: one message at a time, one voice, one logo (the EU emblem). Making it clear and simple that the EU is the actor behind this achievement. This was one of the novelties [of the corporate campaigns]."(Zournatzi 2018).

All three corporate campaigns have commonalities that show an evolution in their conception, deployment and evaluation towards an audience-centric, data based approach that also takes into account intra-Commission cooperation. "For the first time, these campaigns were co-designed with the relevant Commission services and with the Representations, under the steer of DG Communication as domain leader for external communication. The campaign approach and messages were tested through focus groups across the EU, ensuring that they resonate with target audiences. The three campaigns are systematically flanked with decentralised actions in the Member States implemented by both the Commission Representations and the Europe Direct Information Centres at local level" (European Commission 2018b, 2)

For the purpose of this paper, access has been granted to some internal documents of the ongoing campaign #EUandME[16]. The call for tenders sheds light on the DG Communication's, (and specifically its Unit A1 for Strategic Communication's) vision for an audience-centric campaign. The requirements for the bid include a design made from the end-user's perspective, useful for them, locally tailored and focussing not just on facts, "but real stories about real people (using different approaches, including testimonials), with the potential to strike emotional chords" (DG COMM European Commission 2016, 10). The objectives are presented as "challenges", with triggering interest and generating a better-informed opinion about the EU as the prime challenge. The ultimate challenge presented is "to inspire a sense of belonging and an appreciation of core EU values shared between different cultures on a continental scale" with a concrete output of "measurable public recognition of what the EU does for Europeans." (Ibidem, 3). This new approach of appealing to "hearts and minds" resonates with the Van de Braden report and is presented by the Commission as one of the important evolutions brought by the corporate campaigns. "Another thing we are doing that is quite different from the past is that we don't rely only on facts and figures, which is our strong point, we produce a lot of that in the European institutions. But here we try, in our campaigns, to strike a more emotional

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[16] See the list on Annex III.

chord, appeal to hearts and minds…We're looking at raising public awareness about the EU as a whole but also to reach a level where people feel more informed and engage with us more." (Zournatzi 2018).

Targeting and segmentation

To define and refine audience segmentation for #EUandME, the Commission requested potential bidders to consider, among other sources, available polling data, political intelligence by EC Representations, Eurobarometer data and put together a specific Desk Research. (DG COMM European Commission 2016, 5). Presented as a novelty for the Commission, targeting and identifying the best communication channels is also shown as a collective work. "We work very closely with our policy departments in our DGs, to get all the materials, the stories, the content for the campaigns. But also we work very closely with our Representations who are the final deciders of what is going to be run in their country, both form the thematic and linguistic point of view and the media we use." (Zournatzi 2018).

In practice, campaign materials have also been tested qualitatively through focus groups, using a methodology based on identifying the key drivers of citizens' behaviour and the societal trends that emerge all across the European Union. "What we do is we look at those drivers… seeing how people react to certain evolutions creates a bridge, the bridge that you need (between the EU's achievements and what matters to the citizens). Those links weren't there before. What we do is actually look for elements that give us a possibility to create a bridge with who we are trying to reach," explained in an interview Julien Clerckx, Strategic Director at Wide, an external expert to the Commission, involved in the campaign materials testing process for #EUandME. Sociodemographic data is insufficient for targeting, according to the expert. "We noticed all over in Europe that the attitudes of people living in cities are similar. It used to be by sex or family situation. If you base [your assumptions] purely on sociodemographics, you won't be able to identify targets".

Understanding the trends and drivers that move people at the individual and societal levels and in relation to their peers, continued the expert, allow cultural differences to become less important. Two of the common drivers found for EU citizens between 17 and 35 were autonomy and simplicity. Autonomy is understood here as the ability to start one's own company; as the idea that government or big institutions are no longer necessary; that the mastery of online tools gives them what it takes to fend for themselves. As for "simplicity", Clerckx says of the target group's driver: "Everything has to be easy, transparent, simplified. Because we are a generation

that deals with the concept 'false news', being transparent and having the information *I need*, is important and this brings me back to the topic (of the Commission): the information is too complicated and not personalized." This process, with the constraints created by factors such as budget, allowed for adaptations of the campaign, when the feedback from the target group demanded it. Focus groups for #EUandME were conducted in Lille, Frankfurt, Gothenburg, Dublin, Milan, Madrid, Prague and Budapest. (European Commission 2018b, 2).

Deployment: co-creation and online dissemination

The website https://europa.eu/EUandME/ is the hub of the #EUandME campaign (European Commission 2018a). Hosted on Europa general website, it's divided in five sections where audio-visual elements are predominant and texts are presented in a bite-size format. The centrepiece of #EUandME are seven short films of under ten minutes each, directed by European filmmakers and published on the video share platform YouTube. They present, in artistic and symbolic ways, the work the EU does to benefit its citizens in the five identified clusters: skills & business, mobility, sustainability, rights and digital. Throughout the website, tags allow the users to go back to the cluster that best defines their interest. The website also features the winners of a Young Filmmakers Competition (YFC), five short films produced by young Europeans, one on each cluster topic. Both the campaign films and the outputs from the YFC respond to a direct request of DG COMM in its call for tenders: audio-visual co-production. "The objective is to draw on third-party creative potential and to support an audio-visual work/audio-visual works by independent producers (work of fiction, documentary, TV series, gallery of portraits…) The contractor shall make proposals on possible co-production and explore notably the possibility to have a few prominent European filmmakers producing a joint opus in relation to the European project."(DG COMM European Commission 2016, 13). Co-production proved effective in the first impact measurements. The interim report shows the Young Filmmakers Competition as one of the campaign elements making the most long-lasting impact (Kommitment 2019, 17), a confirmation of the need to show materials that directly benefit the end-users and let them express their voices.

Measuring success has also changed for the Commission, with major interest focussing more on impact of the communication actions (moving the needle) than on reach and recall of the campaign. "[For] the figure that matters to us, which is the impact, we do have an increase up to 5% of positive opinion about the EU (in the first corporate campaign Invest EU). We see that by reaching out with the channels and audiences we wanted to use there is a distinct change;

for us this is very encouraging." (Zournatzi 2018). Engagement, however, remains an elusive target when it comes to young Europeans. The #EUandME interim report shows that, even though the initial campaign materials were generally considered clear and authentic, triggered the positive emotions expected and exceeded reach targets, " [the] vast majority of hub visits through paid media that leads to high bounce rate, low level of interaction and short average time spent on the hub"(Kommitment 2019, 19).[17] This lack of engagement could prove problematic when taking into account that the main purpose of the website was to "play the role of a general teaser and generate traffic towards related EU web sources."(DG COMM European Commission 2016, 13). The last impact assessment will be conducted at the end of the campaign (end of 2019).

#EUandME Stories, another section of the website, presents 120 testimonials from young EU citizens in the form of short, "selfie" style videos or written interviews in which they describe how the EU has helped them achieve their dreams or fulfil their potential, always in the context of the five clusters previously identified. For the interim report, stories were tested on focus groups. "Using real testimonies was believed to increase credibility and authenticity, nevertheless some of the stories were considered rather unprofessionally made" (Kommitment 2019, 34).

Digital distribution: what works, who gets the message?

#EUandME is distinct also in the choice of communication channels to disseminate the information as well as in some of the formats to present it. Online channels gain prominence. "The media mix should be appropriate for the most cost-efficient, effective and country-specific dissemination; digital (including paid social media promotion) should be a key driver." Television and other "traditional media" are put in a second place and the document emphasizes that "media buying on TV, radio and print must be thoroughly justified" (DG COMM European Commission 2016, 10). This is an indication that the channels are being tailored to the audience, looking at the media consumption and media habits of the target group. Interesting too are the given examples of potential third-party endorsers or multipliers: "Beneficiaries of EU funded opportunities acting as multipliers, social media influencers, independent bloggers, vloggers and video/film directors" (Ibidem 2016, 9). The fact that "social media analysis and web-analytics to gather trends on key quantitative indicators as well as qualitative feedback" are

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[17] The interim report calls for caution with the traffic figures, since discussions were ongoing about the validity of the Piwik measurement tools. (Kommitment 2019, 19, footnote)

some the most important monitoring and evaluation tools (for reach, recall and engagement) shows a shift towards a digital-based campaigning approach. (ICF Mostra 2018, 2).

Innovation seems key when trying to reach this particular audience. The focus groups' results point out at a higher efficacy of formats new to the Commission in their communication, such as GIFs. "Wave 1 post-survey results suggest that GIFs are particularly successful in conveying campaign message"(Kommitment 2019, 30). It is important to note that pre-existing attitudes towards the EU influenced the results of the focus groups when measuring the authenticity and clarity of the campaign messages. "Similarly to perceived clarity, the attitude towards EU plays an important role in perceived authenticity –the more positive the attitude, the more authentic the message is considered" (Ibidem, 33). This complies with theories about "positive framing" already addressed on the state-of-the-art review (Schuck and Vreese 2012, 60).

Breaking the barriers and reaching out beyond the usual audiences, to those who don't already engage with EU messages has also proved a challenge for #EUandME and future campaigns. Survey results from the interim report "suggest that those exposed to the campaign often engage with it or with information about the European Union...Those with neutral attitude towards the EU, living outside of larger cities, less educated are less reached" (Kommitment 2019, 39, 54). It is important to highlight, that the impact information used for this paper is part of an interim report. As explained earlier, adjustments to the campaign are made according to gained insights; therefore, the outcomes might vary in the final report at the end of 2019.

Conclusion

This paper set out to respond the question "How has the European Commission's communication strategy evolved in the face of contestation?" by conducting a qualitative, analysis of strategic communication documents from the EC and other European institutions between 2004 and 2019 and by looking at the case of the corporate campaign #EUandME. The focus was on the communication towards EU citizens. The hypothesis presented was that the European Commission has been undergoing a slow evolution of its communication strategy, which is still focused on legitimizing the EU, but has most recently shifted towards an audience-centric approach, with a focus on winning "hearts and minds" and an increased use of online tools. In spite of the evolution, the strategy still drags old habits of top-down, informative style of the old bureaucracy.

Legitimizing the European Union has been the constant preoccupation of the European Commission, especially in times of political contestation, with the shared idea that a lack of information about the benefits of the EU project and what the EU is and does is at the root of citizen contestation. The strategic documents analysed show that engaging with citizens (audiences) has also been a constant objective, addressed in a slow, evolutive, back and forth process, that has had important implications both in the internal Commission's communication structure and in the approaches, means and tools to reach citizens. They also show that, with few exceptions, the objective of establishing a dialogue with the citizens has had more to do with learning about their needs and behaviours in order to better convince them of the value of the European project than it has been an exercise in active listening that could allow for true engagement and transformation. The documents show how listening has mostly been used as a marketing tool for gaining insight in order to subsequently frame communication, as well as for validating pre-defined political priorities, messages and communication actions.

Evidence from the case study of the recent corporate communication campaign #EUandME shows that actions that allow citizens to express openly and frames that disrupt the Commission's traditional tools are particularly successful engagement wise. The long-lasting impact and engagement brought by the Young Filmmakers Competition to the #EUandME campaign (Kommitment 2019, 17) in a context of low interaction and high bounce rates is an example of this and a positive sign that this type of spaces are being created. However, this does not topple the fact that most of #EUandME actions are conceived to fulfil the "ultimate" (top-down) objective of "inspire a sense of belonging and an appreciation of core EU values shared between different cultures on a continental scale." An appreciation that should "translate in measurable public recognition of what the EU does for Europeans" (DG COMM European Commission 2016, 3). An opportunity to develop spaces for active listening that promotes true engagement through a more bottom-up approach presents itself.

The analysed documents from recent corporate campaigns show audiences have to find true value in engaging (the "what's in it for me" element). The concrete impact of their engagement –be it via citizen dialogues, social media or movements—in policymaking needs to be clearer. Hints to actions in this direction are highlighted in the report on the results of Citizens' dialogues and citizens' consultations and their influence on the European Council agenda (European Commission 2019a, 4). However, the co-relation between dialogue with citizens and policymaking needs to be fleshed out even further and become crystal clear for citizens if they are to believe their voice matters in policymaking.

The use of values, emotions, metaphors and narratives in policymaking, in particular in framing the EU storyline, is an interesting strategic evolution in communication exemplified by the corporate campaign #EUandME. The Commission's Joint Research Centre has already manifested its plan to conduct further research on these topics and their potential use to guide policymaking and communication. (Mair D., Smillie L., La Placa G., Schwendinger F., Raykovska M., Pasztor Z., van Bavel R 2019) This research deserves close attention.

A future assessment of the impact of the three corporate campaigns developed under the Juncker Commission (still ongoing) can help illuminate the potential contributions of this audience-centric, digital approach to bridging the legitimacy gap. Further research into the institutional aspects of the communicational transformation of the Commission, out of the scope of this paper, is also needed, as is a closer look at the evolution of other communication functions, such as the Spokesperson service, that deals directly with the press. The interaction with other EU Institutions, particularly the European Parliament (that produced, for example, parallel contents addressed at the same audiences under the #EUandME hashtag), the European Council, and with member states to ensure coherent communication with EU citizens and the impact of this interactions is also an important subject that should be explored.

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Barroso I

- Low turnout 2004 EU elections
- Rejection of European Constitution

Barroso II

- Financial & economic crisis of the Eurozone.
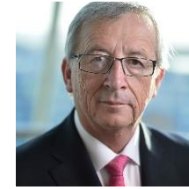
Juncker

- Financial and economic crisis remanents
- Brexit
- Migration & refugee crisis
- The int'l contex. Trump's election

Annex I. Context of contestation against the EU during the last three European Commission Presidencies: Barroso I (2004-2009), Barroso II (2009-2014) & Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019)

Annex II. List of documents to analyse

Barrosso I commission (2004-2009)

- Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on implementing the information and communication strategy for the European Union COM(2004) 196 final.
- Report from the European Parliament on the implementation of the European Union's information and communication strategy (2004/2238(INI))
- Communication to the Commission. Action plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission (SEC(2005) 985 final)
- Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - The Commission's contribution to the period of reflection and beyond - Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate COM (2005) 494 final
- Whitepaper on a European Communication Policy COM(2006) 35 final

Barroso II Commission (2009-2014)

- Communication from the Commission Europe 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. COM(2010) 2020 final
- Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A Budget for Europe 2020 - Part II: Policy fiches. COM (2011) 500 final. Part II.
- Communication to the Commission from Vice-President Reding and Commissioner Lewandowski in agreement with President Barroso. Corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. SEC(2013) 486/2

Juncker Commission (2014-2019)

- Strategic Plan 2016 – 2020 DG COMMUNICATION. Ref. Ares(2016)1853065 - 19/04/2016

- Report commissioned by Juncker: Reaching out to EU citizens: a new opportunity "about us, with us, for us" 2017.

- Communication to the Commission from President Juncher and Commissioner Oettinger. Corporate communication action in 2019-2020 under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. C(2018) 4063 final

- Citizens' dialogues and citizens' consultations. Key conclusions. PDF ISBN 978-92-76-02583-2 doi:10.2775/92815 NA-03-19-258-EN-N

- Mair D., Smillie L., La Placa G., Schwendinger F., Raykovska M., Pasztor Z., van Bavel R., Understanding our political nature: How to put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision-making, EUR 29783 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-76-08621-5, doi:10.2760/374191, JRC117161

Annex III. List of EUandME documents and other resources for the analysis

Internal Commission Documents
- Request for a communication action for a specific contract to be placed in the context of the multiple Framework Contract with renewed competitive tendering for the provision of services linked to the organisation of information and communication campaigns. A Union that empowers. Public information and communication campaign towards EU citizens. Reference: PO/2015-16/A2-A1/01/17
- Public information and communication campaign towards EU citizens: 'A Union that empowers' - Monitoring and evaluation by ICF Mostra.
- EUandME interim campaign performance report.

Audio-visual material
- Tina Zournatzi, Strategic head of unit, conference documents and videos (EuroPcom, Committee of the regions, No. 2018)
- Julian Clerckx, Strategic Director bij Wide - The Strategic Societal Institute (conference documents and videos (EuroPcom, Committee of the regions, No. 2018)

Semi-structured interviews
- o Julian Clerckx, Strategic Director bij Wide - The Strategic Societal Institute, organisation that tested the campaign.
- o Carolien Peeters, EUandME campaing manager (for background, not cited on the paper).
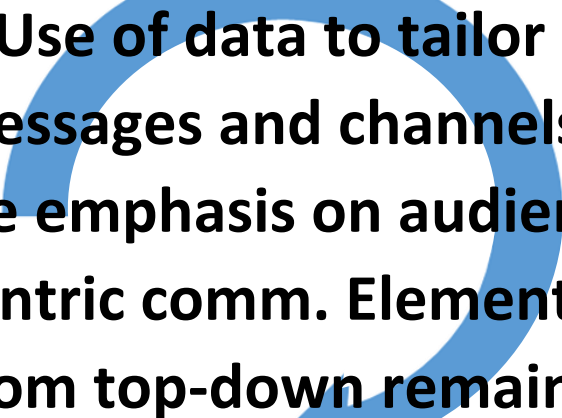
TOP-DOWN

Before 2004

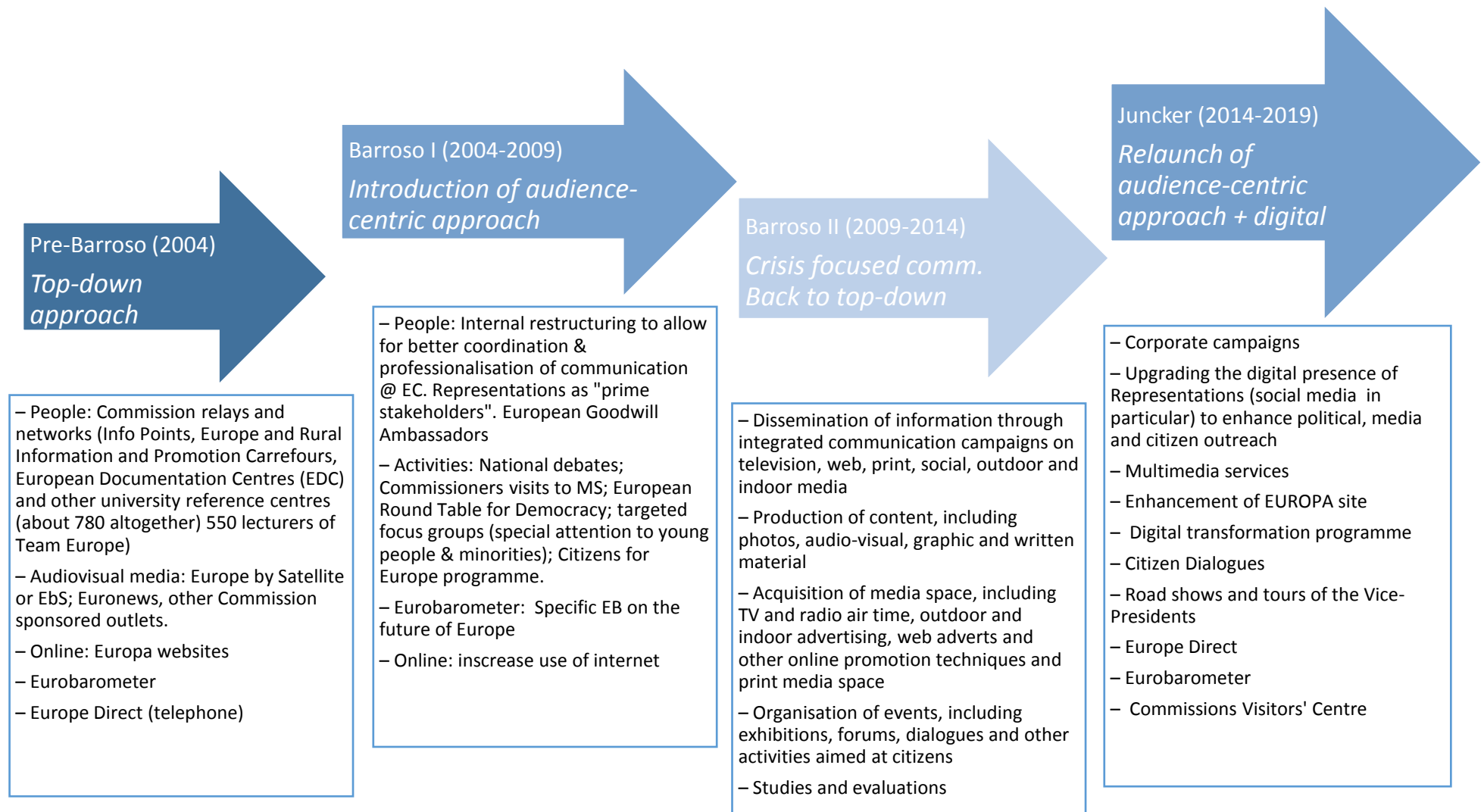**Introduction of dialogue dimension, Research on audiences**

2004-2009

Crisis-focused comm. Focus back on info over dialogue. Intro to corporate.

2009-2014

Use of data to tailor messages and channels. More emphasis on audience-centric comm. Elements from top-down remain.

2014-2019

Annex IV. Evolution of communication focus/style 2004-2019

Pre-Barroso (2004)

Top-down approach

– People: Commission relays and networks (Info Points, Europe and Rural Information and Promotion Carrefours, European Documentation Centres (EDC) and other university reference centres (about 780 altogether) 550 lecturers of Team Europe)

– Audiovisual media: Europe by Satellite or EbS; Euronews, other Commission sponsored outlets.

– Online: Europa websites

– Eurobarometer

– Europe Direct (telephone)

Barroso I (2004-2009)

Introduction of audience-centric approach

– People: Internal restructuring to allow for better coordination & professionalisation of communication @ EC. Representations as "prime stakeholders". European Goodwill Ambassadors

– Activities: National debates; Commissioners visits to MS; European Round Table for Democracy; targeted focus groups (special attention to young people & minorities); Citizens for Europe programme.

– Eurobarometer: Specific EB on the future of Europe

– Online: inscrease use of internet

Barroso II (2009-2014)

Crisis focused comm. Back to top-down

– Dissemination of information through integrated communication campaigns on television, web, print, social, outdoor and indoor media

– Production of content, including photos, audio-visual, graphic and written material

– Acquisition of media space, including TV and radio air time, outdoor and indoor advertising, web adverts and other online promotion techniques and print media space

– Organisation of events, including exhibitions, forums, dialogues and other activities aimed at citizens

– Studies and evaluations

Juncker (2014-2019)

Relaunch of audience-centric approach + digital

– Corporate campaigns

– Upgrading the digital presence of Representations (social media in particular) to enhance political, media and citizen outreach

– Multimedia services

– Enhancement of EUROPA site

– Digital transformation programme

– Citizen Dialogues

– Road shows and tours of the Vice-Presidents

– Europe Direct

– Eurobarometer

– Commissions Visitors' Centre

Annex V. Evolution of the means and tools proposed by the Commission in its communication strategies, according to the approach (top-down vs. audience-centric).

Annex VI. Expert interview

Transcript

Interview with Julien Clerckx- Strtegic director at Wide, the company charged with testing the Corporate campaign materials for the European Commission. Conducted on February 8th, 2019

(Maria Isabel Soldevila) **My understanding is that there were three different campaigns, Invest EU, EUandME and EUProtects**…

(Julien Clerckx) All the campaigns are related, they all aim at general perceptions of the EU, but they were treated as three different campaigns. The evolution I was talking about is that before the European Union saw itself as an informer. We have the information; we have to get it out. And the big problem there is they always, and this is what a lot of brands do, "this is what we have to say, take it in." And the big problem there is a lot of people don't work like that. The fact that the information is available doesn't mean people want that information. They took the information "à la letter", try to wrap a bow around it and hope that people will be interested. So, that's a big evolution we've seen.

 (MIS) So there was no segmentation….

(JC) They had a classic way to do marketing: what is your challenge? What is your message? What is your target? But the whole emotional side was not analysed. Their target was the European citizen, but there wasn't a specified approach to the but not the emotional aspect of who you're trying to reach and there wasn't a sort of "what's in it for me? That's something they're improving strongly. On. They realized everything is a brand today. Brands said: here's my product, buy it. At a certain point, more and more it has become a dialogue, and this dialogue is evolving into a relationship. You have a relationship with the brands that you buy. Why? Because you follow them on Instagram, they send you offers special for you…

(MIS) And you expect that tailoring…

(JC) and that's the point. We had been stuck in a role of an informer instead of facilitator. It's a quid pro quo. I give you something, you give me something. And a lot of consumers, citizens today want to be heard and want to have an influence on everything they do. This has been true for a few years now, but we see it's getting stronger and stronger. *We've seen in the campaigns in general, there is this out of touch with what people really think.*

(MIS) So people want their own space?

(JC) People want their own space; people have never been looking so hard for their identity as today, but in general, to bring it back to the European Commission, I said it before you speak to humans and that's something the Commission honestly forgot. They wanted to get the information out there randomly and hope it got to the lap of people they were trying to reach. This is not true anymore

(MIS) I get a sense from seen previous strategies that it was more focussed on the DG, or the message… and now it's all about unification under the EU flag, not even a logo… could you explain a little bit the steps behind this new way of conceptualizing the strategy?

(JC) That's we do the research for. What we do is we look at those drivers. We look at the megatrends and see how people react to certain evolutions creates a bridge, the bridge that you need (between the EU's achievements and what matters to the citizens). Those links weren't there before. What we do is actually look for drivers, look for elements that give us a possibility to create a bridge with who we are trying to reach and we do this each time on three levels: me, my peers and society. Why? Because you can be one way society wise, and completely different at home. And that's really important, because what does the European Union do? The EU looks at societal issues, but not at the personal issue.

(MIS) Could you tell me a little bit about what you do to find those bridges, those drivers?

(JC) I can't share my whole methodology with you, but I'll explain to you how it works. We focus on trends, on what's happening in society, in politics, economy, psychology… we have all different backgrounds. What we do is a general trend watching and we see what kind of evolutions that we see within society and we test them quantitatively and qualitative in groups all year long for different brands and we notice different evolution. I was in Paris doing research for a car company and the some of the drivers that emerged were ecology, autonomy, liberty, solidarity… are all drivers we identified, we quantified them with a tool we have a tool for; this gives us the end result for different trends. Sometimes we are completely wrong and we have a trend that is completely low, or hasn't developed yet or is just a phase, and sometimes we are bang on…"

(MIS) So it gives you the weight…?

(JC) It tells us a percentage, how many people are sensitive to this trend, what is their age, their socio-demographic background; we also know their attitude, their preferences, their

standpoints, their point of view because what you do is not necessarily what you think and vice-versa; those are anonymous questionnaires that we do and that gives us an idea are they in cities, or out of cities? For example, in Belgium it used to be French speaking vs Dutch speaking and every company wanted the French and the Dutch. They're only half right. For the moment, what we know, noticed all over in Europe is city and rural. We noticed that the attitudes of people living in cities are similar. It used to be by sex or family situation.

(MIS) The limits are blending…

(JC) Exactly and that's why we have to work on those drivers. If you base purely on sociodemographic, you won't be able to identify a target. You always try to limit. We take the window of, between 18-35…

(MIS) There is an age target?

(JC) There are certain drivers that are linked to young people: for example, the trend that surrounds autonomy, the ability to start my own company, and that has to do with the fact that they are the generation that grew up with internet, they are used to have everything available to them. And they know; I don't need government, I don't need big companies, because I have all the tools myself.

(MIS) Could you share with me some of the drivers you were looking at for the campaigns for the Commission for the new strategy?

(JC) At the moment I wasn't looking for any trends. What I was doing is, I take the campaign and I was looking for was identifying the drivers at the end. Why? Because we need to stop at looking at everything at the national level because it's impossible to do. The bigger the EU gets, the more difficult it's going to be to communicate to everyone on a cultural level. So you need to find the drivers that are everywhere. What are the drivers that we found? Autonomy (the ability to start my own company, and that has to do with the fact that they are the generation that grew up with internet, they are used to have everything available to them. And they know; I don't need government, I don't need big companies, because I have all the tools myself) and the simplicity driver, which has become very important. Everything has to be easy, transparent, simplified. Because we are a generation with the concept "false news", being transparent and having the information I NEED, is important and this brings me back to the topic (of the Commission) the information is too complicated and not personalized. Those are two drivers

that the European Union respond to and acknowledge. I've also found that internally they did not necessarily understand why other didn't find it easy, but it's because it's their reality.

(MIS) So what do you do with all that?

(JC) By identifying those drivers we were able to find the kinds of channels they need, how they want to get their information… We always had a campaign to show and we ask, not what you liked or did not like, but to IMPROVE the campaign. So now you have that they find this and this and this important, but you have to do it in this, this and this way. We have a big network of partners in Member States. The interviews are done in their own languages. We develop a profile, they go look for it. With the Commission we try to be slightly representative: people from the city, rural areas, to have a good mix.

(MIS) But I understand you don't include Eurosceptics in the campaign…

(JC) We don't go for Eurosceptics and we also don't go for people who are extreme Euro lovers. Those are filtered out. Why? If you have a group of 10 and one starts bashing the Commission, nobody will say what they think. Same the opposite. But also on the target of the campaign.

(MIS) But you filter them from the focus groups but also as targets for the campaign?

(JC) Yes, yes, both.

(MIS) And what happens in practice?

(JC) We tried to fine-tune the socio-demographics as much as possible, we launch, people get recruited, we do the discussion groups, I go there, we test the campaigns, we also try to see "what's their vision of the European Commission today?" in context with their country, I already received the evolution, and finally I will take all those results, from my partners and try to look for those drivers, try to see how those drivers influence the improvement of the campaign and how the campaign should be altered for the next steps".

(MIS) How are people reacting?

(JC) It's a beautiful thing. A lot of people said "wow, you're finally communicating to us; you're finally talking to us. By identifying the trends, the cultural becomes less important. The big problem is everyone is focusing a lot on culture but everything is the same everywhere. The "rebel-left, rebel-right" is true everywhere. They act, talk the same way. The driver is "react or revolt": the fact that for the moment we go to extremes. Reaction is more important that

action. One thing I've told the Commission is they have to stand for something. They can't please everyone. Like they did with Brexit; that was great.

(MIS) What are people looking for?

(JC) People want utopias. People are looking for identity: it's not the church anymore, it's not their political party. People are lost; everybody is in an identity crisis. So, the choices are, or you open yourself up or you close up. In the 1990s people were looking for someone like them, to represent them. Now they want utopias.

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FORM OF CONSENT (to be adapted to each research project)

I, Julien Clerckx_ , consent to take part to the research project entitled The European Commission's Strategic Shifts in Communication in Times of Contestation.The Case of the #EUandMe Campaign , carried out by Maria Isabel SOLDEVILA, under the supervision of Luciano Morganti, whose address is Avenue Franklin Roosevelt 39, 1050 , whose email is msoldevi@ulb.ac.be_, and whose phone number is 0499911160_.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that:

1. I voluntarily take part to this project.
2. The researcher has informed me in writing of the goals of the research project, its development, and of its possible advantages and downsides.
3. I will be given no payment for taking part to the research project.
4. I can refuse to answer certain questions.
5. The interview will be digitally recorded. I can ask the recording to be stopped at any time, be it temporarily or for good.
6. This recording and the corresponding transcript will be kept under lock and key in Maria Isabel Soldevila's office. The access will be restricted to the supervisor and second readers of the thesis and the data will be destroyed within 5 years.
7. Quotations from the interview can be used in later written publications and oral presentations resulting from this project. Still, my identity, my function, or any other information that can help identifying me will be kept secret at all time. I will simply be presented as a ____._____
8. A copy of the final report will be sent to me at the following address: _____
9. I can, at any moment, take back my consent without reasons and without being penalised.
10. I do not abjure any of my legal rights.

Done in duplicate.

Name of the participant Julien CLERCKX	Signature of the participant
Name of the researcher Maria Isabel SOLDEVILA	Signature of the researcher